Software-Based Architecture for Communication and Cooperation Among Distributed Electronic Agents

By:

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A compact disk containing a computer program listing has been provided in duplicate (copy 1 and copy 2 of the compact disk are identical). The computer program listing in the compact disk is incorporated by reference herein. The compact disk contains files with their names, size and date of creation as follow:

File Name	Size	Creation Date	Last Date
oaa.pl	159,613 bytes	1996/10/08	1998/12/23
fac.pl	52,733 bytes	1997/04/24	1998/05/06
compound.pl	42,937 bytes	1996/12/11	1998/04/10
com_tcp.pl	18,010 bytes	1998/02/10	1998/05/06
translations.pl	19,583 bytes	1998/01/29	1998/12/23

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field of the Invention

The present invention is related to distributed computing environments and the completion of tasks within such environments. In particular, the present invention teaches a variety of software-based architectures for communication and cooperation among distributed electronic agents. Certain embodiments teach interagent communication languages enabling client agents to make requests in the form of arbitrarily complex goal expressions that are solved through facilitation by a facilitator agent.

Context and Motivation for Distributed Software Systems

The evolution of models for the design and construction of distributed software systems is being driven forward by several closely interrelated trends: the adoption of a *networked computing model*, rapidly rising expectations for *smarter, longer-lived, more autonomous software applications* and an ever increasing demand for *more accessible and intuitive user interfaces*.

Prior Art Figure 1 illustrates a *networked computing model* 100 having a plurality of client and server computer systems 120 and 122 coupled together over a physical transport mechanism 140. The adoption of the *networked computing model* 100 has lead to a greatly increased reliance on distributed sites for both data and processing resources. Systems such as the networked computing model 100 are based upon at least one physical transport mechanism 140 coupling the multiple computer systems 120 and 122 to support the transfer of information between these computers.

Some of these computers basically support using the network and are known as *client*

FIGURE 9 depicts operations involved in a client agent initiating a service request and receiving the response to that service request in accordance with a certain preferred embodiment of the present invention;

FIGURE 10 depicts operations involved in a client agent responding to a service request in accordance with another preferable embodiment of the present invention;

FIGURE 11 depicts operations involved in a facilitator agent response to a service request in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention;

FIGURE 12 depicts an Open Agent Architecture™ based system of agents implementing a unified messaging application in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention;

FIGURE 13 depicts a map oriented graphical user interface display as might be displayed by a multi-modal map application in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention;

FIGURE 14 depicts a peer to peer multiple facilitator based agent system supporting distributed agents in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention;

FIGURE 15 depicts a multiple facilitator agent system supporting at least a limited form of a hierarchy of facilitators in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention; and

FIGURE 16 depicts a replicated facilitator architecture in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

Figure 3 illustrates a distributed agent system 300 in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention. The agent system 300 includes a facilitator agent 310 and a plurality of agents 320. The illustration of Figure 3 provides a high level view of one simple system structure contemplated by the present invention. The facilitator agent 310 is in essence the "parent" facilitator for its "children" agents 320. The agents 320 forward service requests to the facilitator agent 310. The facilitator agent 310 interprets these requests, organizing a set of goals which are then delegated to appropriate agents for task completion.

The system 300 of Figure 3 can be expanded upon and modified in a variety of ways consistent with the present invention. For example, the agent system 300 can be distributed across a computer network such as that illustrated in Figure 1. The facilitator agent 310 may itself have its functionality distributed across several different computing platforms. The agents 320 may engage in interagent communication (also called peer to peer communications). Several different systems 300 may be coupled together for enhanced performance. These and a variety of other structural configurations are described below in greater detail.

Figure 4 presents the structure typical of a small system 400 in one embodiment of the present invention, showing user interface agents 408, several application agents 404 and meta-agents 406, the system 400 organized as a community of peers by their common relationship to a facilitator agent 402. As will be appreciated, Figure 4 places more structure upon the system 400 than shown in Figure 3, but both are valid representations of structures of the present invention. The facilitator 402 is a specialized server agent that is responsible for coordinating agent communications and cooperative problem-solving. The facilitator 402 may also provide a global data store for its client agents, allowing them to adopt a blackboard style of interaction. Note that certain advantages are found in utilizing two or more facilitator agents within the system 400. For example, larger systems can be assembled from multiple facilitator/client groups, each having the sort of structure